

Wisconsin Wildlife *Fast Facts*

From various sources by Christian W. Cold, WDNR Ladysmith

Few North American animals better fit the model of familiar backyard wildlife than the raccoon. Sprightly and mischievous, the little masked bandit has crossed paths with virtually every American at one time or another. We admire it for its curiously human-like attributes of ingenuity and adaptability. It is one of few animals which has thrived in the face of encroaching civilization....sometimes because of us...and sometimes in spite of us.



Raccoon *Procyon lotor*
(before the dog) (washer)

Synonyms:

Coon, arakun – Algonquin (“he scratches with his hands” – later modified to English), wica or weecha – Sioux (meaning “little man”) , essikan – Chippewa, aspun - Potowatomi.

Description:

A small, roundish, bear/dog-like mammal with pointed face, and thick, grizzled coat in shades from gray to reddish-brown or buff. Occasionally white – more rarely black.

Length to 50”. Weight to 30lbs (record 62 lbs.6oz –Wisconsin) Females 15% smaller.

Face has dark mask across eyes. Tail is bushy with 4-10 black rings. Five toes. Walks with plantigrade gate (entire sole in contact with ground).

The largest raccoons are found in north portion of range (Bergmann’s Rule).

Smallest (pale) race in Florida Keys (4-6 lbs).

Seven distinct types are recognized (debated).

Range: Southern Canada to Argentina.

Origin:

Procyonids emerged from primitive “bear-dogs” in Eurasia towards the end of the Oligocene epoch (25m-18m yrs.). Some groups remained on the continent while others emigrated (in successive movements) to North America via the former Beringia land bridge. By the middle Miocene (8-10 my) several varieties were well-established on the Great Plains, which was heavily vegetated and threaded with watercourses. During the Pliocene (1.8-5my) several fossorial (diggers-resembling badgers) forms occurred, but by the early Pleistocene (1.8 my) most surviving types had evolved to resemble the familiar tree-dwelling animal (with a variable diet) of today. This “adaptive radiation” reached its peak (and epicenter) in Middle America (tropical Mexico & Central America). By 1.5 million years ago, there were several distinct types of raccoon in the Americas, including one form (S. America) the size of a black bear.

Wisconsin status & history:

Presently numerous and widespread statewide. Formerly (1920’s) drastically reduced due to indiscriminate trapping and shooting.

From 1936 through 1950, populations were so low that the Wisconsin Conservation Department sponsored a propagation & stocking program (State Experimental Game & Fur Farm, Poynette) to reestablish populations in depleted areas.

The total statewide population today probably exceeds sixty thousand animals.

Habitat:

Raccoons can thrive in an enormous variety of habitats. They are most abundant on moist (mesic), wooded areas with access to water (essential). Hardwood river bottom (floodplain) forests and/or freshwater marshes. Also suburban/residential areas and cultivated or abandoned farmland. Lower numbers are expected to occur in dry upland forests, especially where pines are mixed with hardwoods or in pure pine forests.

Population dynamics: Estimates of density average 20 raccoons/square km in Midwest.

Extreme of one raccoon/acre has been reported in Missouri (Swan Lake NWR).

Size of home ranges (like with most wildlife) is largely dependent on sex, age, population density and habitat quality. Home range estimates of 35 acres to 2000 acres have been reported. Male raccoons typically maintain larger home ranges.

Behavior:

Nocturnal. Travel to feeding areas 4-8:00 p.m. Return to rest area > 3:00a.m. Raccoons usually travel in straight lines between den sites and food patches.

A “fundamental social structure” exists where males from neighboring territories recognize and avoid each other in a (loose) dominant/subordinate pattern of interactions. Interactions between adult males from widely-separated locations quickly become intensely aggressive (something to consider when translocating nuisance males).

Poorly-developed homing instinct, when transplanted.

Vocalizations include growls and rasping screams (aggression, fear or alarm), loud purr (pleasure), low grunts (warning), and harsh screech owl-like tremulo (call note).

Raccoon temperament and disposition varies among individuals, however most animals appear to become more temperamental and sullen as they get older.

Winter:

Raccoons do not hibernate, however they do exhibit initial metabolic responses to winter which are (rudimentarily) similar to bears. One important physiological change involves the increase in size and activity of insulin-producing glands (in pancreas) which results in below-normal blood sugar levels (hypoglycemia), which also occurs in animals which are true hibernators. Raccoons periodically emerge and forage during periods of thaw. Most animals are out and about by late March.

Diet:

Practically anything nutritional and accessible.

Seasonal diet patterns:

Spring – Greatest animal component w/small rodents (25-30% in Great Lakes). Also residual corn & acorns.

Summer – Approx. 80 % of summer diet may be soft mast (wild & cultivated fruits). Raccoon favorites include grapes, cherries, apples, plums, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, strawberries, juneberries (serviceberries), & dogwood. Also squash, melons, sweet corn or field corn in milk stage.

Crayfish (principal animal), insects (esp. grasshoppers), other arthropods, small vertebrates (incl. muskrat kits), deer carrion, fish (shallow or strandings).

Surprisingly, amphibians do not (typically) constitute a significant proportion of raccoon diets. Also turtle eggs in season, and eggs & hatchlings of waterfowl, herons & cormorants (Mead W.A. experience - 1989). Raccoons occasionally raid the nests of larger raptors, including ospreys, harriers, red-tailed, broad-winged, red-shouldered, Cooper's & goshawks and most owl species.

Fall – Hard mast (incl. corn), late/desiccating soft mast, late insects.

Where raccoon populations are exceptionally high, the impact on their primary prey populations may significantly influence the composition of the local wildlife community. The reader is advised to consider local conditions/resources when attempting to predict or determine raccoon diets in their area.

Intelligence: Raccoons fall somewhere between monkeys and cats in the speed with which they form associations. They appear to rival monkeys in the complexity of the associations they can make. They are considered capable of cultural inheritance or the passing of learned behavior to future generations. Young raccoons will copy the response of their parents to new foods and eventually introduce this behavior to their own offspring (see Human dimensions). These attributes have contributed to the raccoon's success as one of the most adaptable and wide-ranging animals in North and Central America.

Adaptations, unique abilities and limitations:

Very good (binocular) visual acuity - even at night. Eyes reflect red to green.

Excellent hearing with higher auditory range than dogs or red foxes (detect mice).

Acute olfactory sensitivity (probably works in concert with tactile "rolling of food").

Extreme tactile sensitivity - the long, soft-skinned fingers of the front paws possess 4X the sensory receptors as the hind paws.

Observe a raccoon as it forages along the edge of a stream or pond. Once it has located an item of interest (and with eyes “gazing off into space”) the animal excitedly pats, rolls, touches and manipulates the object, while attempting to determine its palatability. Although as sensitive as primate hands (and somewhat similar in appearance), they have much less motor function, and should not be considered comparable. Agile climbers, fair runners (15mph), and strong swimmers (> 3/4 mile at 3 mph), however the fur is not waterproof. Raccoons can drop 40’ from trees without apparent injury.

Reproduction:

Promiscuous with no pair bond. Males are typically solitary individuals. Females are sexually mature in their first year. Males at two years. Mating begins in the upper Great Lakes during January (peaks in February). Gestation is 63-65 days. Den site is usually < 150 yds. from a water source. Nursery den is usually hollow tree (often silver maple or black willow) but may be in woodchuck burrow, building, chimney, barn, garage, rain sewer, abandoned car, boat etc. One to eight 2 ½ oz. young will be 15lbs by fall. Young often den with mother for first winter. Full size is attained by end of second year. Maturing males vacate the area by second spring. Maturing females often permitted to reside in their mother’s territory (like bears).

Life span:

To 16 years in the wild (average 5 yrs).
Captivity record of 21 years.

Mortality & disease:

Most noteworthy viral diseases include canine distemper & rabies (similar staggering about), or rabies/distemper complex and encephalitis. Bacterial diseases include tularemia and leptospirosis. Several epizootics effect many individuals and spread rapidly through populations. Sylvatic plague, pneumonia and chronic pleurisy also reported. Although not always (strictly) nocturnal, any urban raccoon observed foraging during the day should be “cause for concern”. Parasites include several ticks, fleas, lice, mites (incl. mange), roundworms, tapeworms, flukes and lungworms. The roundworm Baylisascaris procyonis is a serious threat to humans (esp. children) in the Midwest and Northeast. Natural predators of raccoons include wolf, cougar, bobcat, horned owl (preys on unattended young), and fisher. Starvation is a principal factor in late winter mortality - especially with yearling raccoons following successive hard mast (acorn) crop failures.

Human dimensions:

Because of their innate curiosity and ability to recognize and exploit opportunities, raccoons frequently come into conflict with humans in settled areas. Their reputation in orchards,

vineyards, melon patches, corn fields, and poultry yards is legendary. In heavily settled areas, small dogs and domestic cats are occasionally attacked and killed by defensive mothers or older (predatory) males.

Raccoons are second-only to skunks in the frequency of nuisance wildlife complaints (and sometimes rank #1).

Raccoon pelts have been marketed and their flesh (dark chicken ~ lamb) has been eaten since colonial times. The fur, while coarse, bulky, and therefore “unfashionable” has high wear quality. Animals from the upper Mississippi Valley have the longest and finest raccoon fur in the country.